



The Fables of Olympianos

Translated from Classical Armenian
by Robert Bedrosian

Sources of the Armenian Tradition (Long Branch, New Jersey, 2019)

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Some useful links:

[Aesop](#), at Wikipedia.

[Aesop's Fables](#), at Wikipedia.

[Medieval Bestiary](#), by David Badke.

The Fables of Olympianos

Translator's Preface

[i]

The fables of Olympianos translated below all are known from larger collections attributed to Aesop. However, our text contains only 23 of them, and they are shorter. It is believed that the Classical Armenian text (which probably dates from the 8th-9th centuries) is a translation of a lost Greek original—a selection from Aesop's fables made in Byzantium. If so, it joins a group of other sources whose Greek originals have disappeared, and which survive only in translations made into Armenian, Syriac, Ethiopic and other languages.

The origin of the fables attributed to Aesop is a topic which has received scholarly attention for over 100 years. The first reference to Aesop appears in the writings of Herodotus (5th century B.C.), and it is believed that Aesop himself lived in the 7th-6th centuries B.C. How many fables he is responsible for is unknown. However, due to the prestige of his name, dozens of later tales became associated with his work. By the medieval period the volume of these had expanded greatly. Some modern collections have more than 150 tales. Joseph Jacobs in his fascinating study, *The Fables of Aesop* (London, 1889) suggests that the inspiration for many of the tales came from Indian collections, such as the Hindu *Panchatantra*, the Buddhist *Jatakas* and other works which reached the West in abridgements over a long period of time. Attached to the present document are 77 pages extracted from Jacobs' work, which include a chart of possible sources, as well as some of his data and conclusions. Medieval Syriac literature, too, has Aesopic collections, including groups with 83, 64, and only 10 fables. It is within this general group and genre—known as the Oriental Aesop—that our Olympianos belongs.

To my knowledge, the first reference to Olympianos in Armenian literature appears in the *History of the House of the Artsrunis* by *vardapet* Tovma Artsruni (early 10th century), who mentions the tale of the Lion and the Bulls, "known from Olpian the philosopher" [Թովմայի վարդապետի Արծրունոյ Պատմութիւն տանն Արծրունեաց *Tovmayi vardapeti Artsrunwoy Patmut'iwn tann Artsruneats'* (St. Petersburg, 1887), Book 3, chapter 1, p. 123]. Olympianos has not been the subject of a separate monograph—with the exception of Emile Galtier's work (see below). Generally, Armenian philologists such as N. Marr and M. Abeghyan mention Olympianos only in connection with the collections of other medieval fabulists, such as Vardan Ayeke's'i and Mxit'ar Gosh.

The Classical Armenian text of Olympianos appears on pp. 169-187 of Առավել Միկրարայ Գոշի *Ar'akk' Mxit'aray Goshi* [*The Fables of Mxit'ar Gosh* (Venice, 1854)], as a separate section at the end, and is included as an attachment to the pdf version of the present English translation. The same text was translated into French with good notes and an introduction by Emile Galtier, "Les Fables d'Olympianos," in *Institut français d'archéologie orientale*, Bulletin 4:17-30 (Cairo, 1905). Galtier's work also appears as an attachment to the present document. It contains a useful table which matches the fables of Olympianos with those of Aesop and Vardan. Russian translations of several of Olympianos' fables were made by H. Orbeli and are available at Internet Archive for reading online and/or downloading in various formats: [Басни средневековой Армении](#) [Basni srednevekovoi Armenii](#) [*Fables of Medieval Armenia*].

The transliteration used here is a modification of the Library of Congress system for online Armenian, substituting **x** for the LOC's **kh**, for the thirteenth character of the Armenian alphabet (խ). Otherwise we follow the LOC transliteration, which eliminates diacritical marks above or below a character, and substitutes single or double quotation marks to the character's right. In the LOC romanization, the seventh character of the alphabet (հ) appears as **e'**, the eighth (լ) as **e''**, the twenty-eighth (ն) as **r'**, and the thirty-eighth (օ), as **o'**.

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A Note on Pagination

The printed editions of these online texts show the page number at the top of the page. In the right margin the pagination of the Classical Armenian (*grabar*) text also is provided. We have made the following alterations for the online texts: the page number of the printed English editions (*Sources of the Armenian Tradition* series) appears in square brackets, in the text. For example [101] this text would be located on page 101, and [102] this text would be on page 102. The *grabar* pagination is as follows. This sentence corresponds to the information found on page 91 of the Classical Armenian text [g91] and what follows is on page 92. In other words, the Classical Armenian text delimiters [gnn] indicate **bottom** of page.

The Fables of Olympianos

[1]

1. The nurse and the child

The nurse said to the child, because it was crying: "If you do not keep quiet, I will take you and throw you to the wolf!" It happened that a wolf heard these words and was looking forward to some prey. And so it stayed there until evening, to seize the child. However, evening came on and the child went to sleep. The wolf went off, bitter about the lost prey for that day. His lady inquired and he answered: "Whoever trusts a woman will be deceived."

And you, do not believe them. Know that many of them make artful promises and arouse your hopes with [deceptive] words [*end* of *grabar* (Classical Armenian text) page 169; henceforth shown as, for example, g169].

2. The turtle and the horse

The turtle challenged the horse to a race. After they had designated the rules, the horse ridiculed the matter and gave itself over to all kinds of pleasure and idleness. The turtle, on the other hand, diligently paid attention to the arena and to training, and improved its speed through exercise. When the hour of the race arrived, the stands were full. They were ready and the signal for starting was given. Then the horse, because of its excessive idleness, seemed to be bound and could not even move. Meanwhile, the turtle, moving faster than one would have thought possible, completed the course and was recognized as the victor.

It is not worth believing that all is determined by [one's] nature. Everything requires exercise and attention [g170].

3. The lion and the maiden

A lion, astonished by the beauty of a maiden, longed for her. He went to her father to request her as his wife. Now the father, who was frightened, did not dare to refuse, but cunningly found a ruse and said to the lion: "I am delighted to have you for a son-in-law, but my girl is scared of your claws and huge teeth. Now if you were to come back without them, you would appear as a more desirable and attractive husband." The lion agreed to this, since he was head over heels in love. Having had his claws and teeth removed, the lion went to see the girl. As soon as he entered the house, he was killed by stones, since he had no means of defense.

This fable advises people not to remove the weapons that nature has given them.

4. The weasel bride

A weasel fell in love with a young man, and begged Venus to turn her into a beautiful [g171] woman. Her wish was granted and she appeared to be a lovely woman. She was engaged to the one she loved and they had a wedding full of songs, performances, and wedding lanterns. But as soon as she spotted a mouse, she chased after it as prey.

Thus our natural dispositions are irresistible and stronger than anything.

5. The lion and his cunning

Old age had reduced the lion's strength and speed, and so he employed some cunning to make his hunting easier. He pretended to be sick and broadcast the news of his illness. Then the animals came from all over to see him. The lion would invite them in and, once they were inside, he would engage in his customary practise. Now it happened that the fox became aware of his deception, and remained outside by the door, conducting his visit from there. The lion asked: "How is it that only you, of all the others, stay on the other side of the door?" The fox replied: "It's the footprints that hold me back, because the footprints of those entering are clear, but the footprints of those leaving cannot be seen" [g172].

Simple people are deceived by cunning, but to wise folk, the cunning is apparent.

6. The stag and his mother

A stag's mother asked him: "Why are you so frightened of dogs? You are bigger and faster, and also have your antlers to drive them away." The stag replied: "Indeed, I am aware of my great size, I am proud of my antlers, and could win a race [against them]. But when I merely hear a bark, all my reasoning dissolves, and I become frightened and flee."

Exhortations and encouragements of any kind do not and will not give courage to those who are cowardly by nature.

7. A beauty contest among the birds

A messenger came from [the god] Ormuzd to the birds telling them to come to him in the East [g173] for a contest. The most beautiful among the birds would become the king. The springs and rivers then filled up with birds, preening themselves. They removed any unsightly feathers and left untouched the feathers which beautified them. Now a jay came up with the following trick: he added to his own feathers the feathers of other birds and adjusted them so that he became really attractive and as variegated in colors as a flower garden. He prided himself on the brilliance of his feathers and truly astonished all the birds, amazing even the gods. They all gave way and accorded him the victory. However, the bat was smarter than all the rest of them, and recognized his own feathers. He approached [the jay] and tore them off, revealing the deception to all the birds. Then each of

them approached and tore off its own feathers, leaving the jay denuded and the laughing-stock of all the birds.

Now this shows that we should be satisfied with what we have received from nature [gl74], and not seek external ornamentation.

[3]

8. How the rabbits changed their minds

Rabbits, having gathered in one place, said: "Our lives are not real lives, because the eagles, dogs, and everyone else attack us and there are so many different dangers surrounding us. It is better that we dive into this lake and drown." This was their will and all of them were unanimous in the decision. Now when they had reached the shore of the lake, frogs—hearing the noise of their movement—plunged themselves into the depths of the lake, out of fear. Then one of the rabbits, who was an elder, realized what had happened and said: "Hold on, my friends" he said, "and don't martyr yourselves, since there are some creatures who are even more timid than we are."

It is a consolation to the unfortunate to see others enduring even worse things [gl75].

9. The raven and the swan

A raven complained about its nature, blaming its feathers for being black, and looking with longing at the whiteness of the swan. The latter said: "It is pointless to wonder at the difference, since our situations are so different. For you are always frequenting altars with their smoke, where your wings become dark, while I am in [clean] meadows and rivers every day." This seemed like an accurate explanation to the raven, and so he moved to the rivers and meadows—hoping that the change would affect his feathers. But, through his stupidity, he died of hunger and in no way was the blackness reduced.

It is pointless to adopt a new way which goes against one's nature.

10. The ass that seemed to be a lion

Once there was an ass that seemed to be a lion, because it had wrapped itself in a lion's skin. Its appearance, from a distance [gl76] inspired fear, and all the herds of oxen and flocks of sheep took to flight at the very sight. But when a strong wind blew and stripped the ass of the lion's skin, the deception was revealed. All the animals rushed to him. Some threw things at him and others beat him, because he was only an ass which had fooled many into thinking that he was a lion.

As for you, O intelligent one, you are in need of some disciplining, because even though you are really ignorant, you affect the look of educated folk.

11. Doctor frog

Once a frog, with a resounding voice, spoke pridefully to the other animals. "I can be your doctor and heal everyone, since I studied the arts of Asclepius." Having proclaimed this, it thought that it would be regarded as [a physician], and swelled up with pride. Now the fox, which was considered the wisest of them all, rebuked the frog for its pride. "It is clear," the fox remarked [g177], "from the body you display—so green and sickly—that while you [claim that you] can cure others with your remedies, you cannot make yourself look healthy."

It is not worth rebuking liars, since often they betray themselves.

12. The wolves and the sheep

Wolves went as emissaries to the sheep and said: "Dogs are the cause of the constant warfare and hatred between you and us, because they infuriate us and drive us to hatred in spite of ourselves. But if you remove them, peace will exist between you and us, and you will experience no evil from us." The sheep believed this, since they are stupid, and they suppressed the guard dogs. The wolves, seeing them without the dogs, attacked and slaughtered all of them.

The fable advises us to be wary of the advice of enemies [g178].

13. The bulls and the lion

Bulls were grazing together. It happened that a lion was somewhere in the neighborhood and, from fear of this lion, the bulls kept together. They grazed and walked together and kept themselves safe from the lion. Now the lion, unable to conquer them by force, devised a ruse. Falsely pretending to be a friend, he presented himself to each of them separately and repeated their reciprocal slander. Having made them enemies of one another, he separated them and seized them.

This advises friends to hold to their friendship firmly.

14. The raven and the fox

A raven had a piece of cheese in its mouth and was perched in a lofty place [g179]. Now the fox set to work to get the cheese from it. The fox approached and, casting an eye on the raven, declared that it was lucky because of its very nature. "You are black in color and a child of the night. It is fitting for you to rejoice in your color, for you possess qualities that others lack. You have wisdom and there is nothing that would prevent the kingship of the birds from passing from the eagle to you—nor would anyone oppose it—if only you had the right voice." Motivated by the praise, the raven wanted to show off its great voice and so it opened its beak and uttered a loud cry. The cheese fell and became the fox's prey. Now when the fox had filled up with this food it said: "You have a very strong voice, but you are lacking in judgment."

Never trust the flattery of liars, if you understand the meaning of this fable [g180].

[5]

15. Urban monkeys

Monkeys thought up something which was beyond their nature: envious of humans, they had the idea that they would become city-dwellers. They would establish assemblies and councils, practise trades, and live together in the manner of human beings. After this had been decided upon and they began the work, one of the old monkeys asked them: "How did you come up with such an idea? As of now, when people hunt us, it is not easy for them. But if we are crammed together in a closed place, they can surround us and kill us [easily].

Old age possesses wisdom through the effect of time, but more so through experience.

16. The eagle and the beetle

An eagle was persecuting a partridge, and the partridge took refuge with a beetle. The beetle served as intermediary, but the eagle would not listen to it. Angered, the beetle climbed [g181] up to the eagle's nest, and destroyed its eggs by rolling them out and casting them down. In this way, it deprived the eagle of offspring for a long time. Then the eagle went and laid its eggs in the king's bosom. When the beetle learned about this, it went and climbed up between the king's legs. It stung him in that part of his body, causing the king to jump up, and causing the eggs to fall and break.

This demonstrates that, if possible, never make enemies of people, even if they are poor and weak.

17. The ant and the dove

A dove threw a twig to an ant so that it would not drown in the water. Then, [returning the kindness,] the ant bit a hunter in the groin, so that the dove could escape from him.

18. The hunter and the partridge

A hunter caught a partridge and wanted to kill it. Then the partridge said: "Don't kill me, for I will deceive many partridges and bring them to your traps." Then the hunter replied: "Now you will surely [g182] die by my hand, since you would betray to death your loved ones and relatives.

This fable demonstrates that you must not set a trap for your loved ones, because God is not pleased by your deed, and will prepare the same for you in return.

19. Noise and illusion

A fox was hungry. It found some ice which it started to grind and eat. And it said: "Woe is me! The arrival of the wolf has been horrible [for me], since now there is noise in my head and nothing [real] enters my stomach!"

The fable demonstrates that the glory and greatness of this world is merely a dream only composed of noise and illusion. At the end nothing remains, because [glory and greatness] are fleeting and deceptive.

20. The fox and its tricks

They asked the fox: "How many tricks and deceits do you know?" It laughed [? ke"kzets'aw] and replied: "I know a thousand tricks and techniques. Thirty of them are in my tail [alone], before the dog, not to mention [the tricks available] throughout my [whole] body. However [g183], my greatest trick is this one: not to see the dog and not to be seen by the dog."

This fable points out that while those who do penance to God for their sins are innumerable, the perfect one does not sin at all.

21. The widow and her son

A widow had a son. The boy started to steal fruit and vegetables and the mother delightedly ate them, not counseling the boy about the will of God. The son expanded his thieving, bringing [home] animals and vessels. When he became a man, he became a robber chief in the mountains and wrought many evil deeds. When they caught him and took him for hanging, he said: "Bring my mother here so that I may kiss her." Now as soon as the mother came, he bit off his mother's nose. The king said: "O evil-doer, why did you bite off your mother's nose?" He replied: "I did that because, from my boyhood on, she did not teach me about the will of God and, as a result, I have landed in this sorry state. What I did [to her] was justified. And [g184] the king ordered that the man should be freed and that his mother should be hanged.

This fable demonstrates that all parents who do not counsel their children about the will of God shall, on the Day of Judgment, bear responsibility for the sins of their children.

22. The fox and the crab

The fox and the crab became brothers. Together they sowed, harvested, and threshed into piles. The fox said: "Let's go up onto the hill here and whoever comes down the fastest, let him take the grain." Now when they had ascended, the crab said: "Do me a kindness, and when you want to start running, strike with your tail in front of me so I will know and come behind you." The fox struck with his tail and ran. And the crab had attached itself to the fox's tail. When the fox reached the pile [of grain], it turned around to see where the crab had got to. Meanwhile, the crab dropped down on the pile and said: "In the name of God, these three and a half bushels belong to me!" The fox was astounded [g185] and remarked: "O you wicked creature, when did you get here?"

This shows that deceitful people say and do things which work to their own detriment, and that the weak [may] defeat them. Again, many sinners, with their weak bodies, work wisely and conquer satan. With confession and tears they atone for their sins and become masters of the heavenly bread.

23. The lion and the fox

Once upon a time, a lion took a fox as a servant. The lion said: "When you see blood in my eyes, it is a sign. Let me know, because it means that I need to go hunting." The lion hunted and they were happy. The fox became proud, left the lion, and went and made the wolf his servant. Then the fox said to the wolf: "Whether there is blood in my eyes or not, when I ask you, just say that there is." And the wolf said: "There is an accumulation of blood in your eyes." The fox rejoiced and sat down in a place where the oxen passed, saying to the wolf: "You [g186] be my scout (?)." Now when the oxen arrived, the wolf ran in front of them as [the fox] had seen [done] when it served the lion. But a young ox struck the fox a blow on the head and killed it. And then the wolf said: "Get up, because there really is blood in your eyes now."

This fable demonstrates that it is not fitting for people to want more than they are capable of, either spiritually or physically [g187].
